

## Little Talks by puddingandtame

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**Characters:** Eleven | Jane Hopper, Jim "Chief" Hopper, Jonathan Byers, Joyce Byers, Karen Wheeler, Murray Bauman, Nancy Wheeler, Will Byers

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**Summary:**

Even in death, Joyce can't get rid of Hopper. The jury is still out on whether this qualifies as a mental break or a haunting.

# 1. Chapter 1

“I know it’s been a long day, but I just have a few questions.”

Joyce didn’t raise her eyes from the cigarette burning between her fingers. She had taken it when Owens offered, grateful more for the familiarity of the action than the nicotine. She didn’t remember if she’d actually brought it to her lips. She barely remembered how she had gotten into this room—no, not room. A box truck, some portable detainment vehicle.

Owens was seated on the other side a small foldable table, hands folded and brow furrowed. Murray was to her left side, legs bouncing and head swiveling.

“You can’t hold us here.” Murray blurted out, jabbing the table with his pointer finger. Two soldiers had dragged him into the van after he tried to flee the scene. “We have rights.”

Owen’s voice was heavy with resignation. “Mr. Bauman, isn’t it?”

Murray leaned back, chin jutting forward. “I don’t have to tell you my name. I don’t have to tell you anything.”

“True. There’s not much point since we already know who you are given your involvement in the Barbara Holland debacle.” Joyce could feel the sheer panic radiating off of Murray. Before he could protest, Owens had turned to her, his face softening. “What I don’t understand is how you got pulled into all of this.”

Her voice sounded strange to her own ears, too thin and raspy. Maybe it was the weird echo bouncing back from the white walls. “The magnets on my fridge de-magnetized. Hopper and I—” Joyce felt a shudder of a sob rising up and she quickly brought the cigarette to her lips, squeezing her eyes shut. In the dark, his bruised and bloodied face was burned into her mind. That broken smile before

everything-- “We wanted to be sure it wasn’t the Gate again. Everything kind of...fell apart.”

“All of this from a couple of magnets?”

She brought the cigarette shakily to her lips and murmured. “It’s been a long couple of days.”

“If anything, Joyce did your job for you.” Murray griped. Owen’s threat only seemed to bolster the conspiracy theorist’s indignation. “And where were you guys, while the Russians were building a goddamned fortress under American soil?”

Owens brow furrowed and his body tensed. Joyce took another drag, focusing on the far wall as Murray and Owens began to go at it, their shouts building over each other until she felt she was drowning in white noise. None of this mattered. Her eyes flickered to the wristwatch on Owen’s wrist. It was only ten minutes to eight. It felt like she had been here for an eternity--

*Looks like we’re going to miss Enzo’s. Again.* A familiar voice murmured in her right ear. Joyce’s head whirled to look at seat next to her and felt the air driven out of her chest. Hopper. He was slouched with his arms crossed and legs extended the full length of the van, but he looked better than he had since the beginning of their investigation. The Soviet uniform had been traded for the hideous pastel shirt and blue jeans. Bright blue eyes flickered to meet hers (no trace of blood or bruises) and he winked. *Job well done, Detective Byers. We solved the case.*

“Hop?” She breathed. “What—“, but he held a finger to his lips, nodding back to Owens.

Murray and Owens had faltered off mid-sentence. The doctor cleared his throat. “That’s what I wanted to ask you about, Joyce, before Mr. Bauman here got us off track.” He shot a look at Murray before continuing. Owens spoke slowly as though he was finding the words as he went. “The facility was empty when we got there. We didn’t find anything, no staff, no documents-- nothing. We didn’t...find Jim.”

Joyce was frozen. Owens seemed to be completely oblivious to the fact the man he was asking about was seated across from him. On her other side, Murray had fallen silent, staring at the table. Neither of them acknowledged Jim's presence.

*I don't think they can see me.* Hopper stretched out an arm behind Joyce's head and tried to cuff Murray's bowed head. It looked like his hand made contact, but Murray didn't react or move. Hopper made a noise of disappointment. He tried to take the cigarette out of Joyce's fingers, grumbling when it stayed in place, its tiny plume of smoke curling upward, completely unaffected. *Well this is bullshit.*

"You don't-- you didn't see him?" Joyce's eyes flickered between Hopper trying to pry the cigarette away and Owens' somber gaze.

*Nice catch. Don't want them to think you're, you know...* Hopper whistled, twirling his pointer finger around his ear.

Owens shook his head. "What happened after you turned the keys?"

*That was a nice trick with the belt, by the way. Resourceful.*

"I don't..." Heart pounding, she looked back at Hopper who shrugged. What were the options here? A ghost? A hallucination? Had she finally cracked? A succession of emotions rapidly filtered through her mind, each one as jarring as the next; confusion, relief, joy, panic. Her mind was slowly settling on the only productive one she could muster right now; anger. "He was gone. When I looked up...he wasn't there anymore."

"Alexi said it would turn anyone nearby into dust." Murray added quietly.

"The scientist from Hess Farm? We didn't find his body either."

*Poor Smirnoff.*

Murray sighed. "Say what you will about the Reds, but they know how to cover their tracks."

"Give them a fucking trophy." Joyce beat Owens to the punch on that one, shooting Murray a furious look before focusing back on the

doctor. "Someone should have known. Why didn't you guys know?"

"What guys?"

"Guys! I don't know, the government? The fucking government who let this happen right under their noses?"

Owens ran a hand over his face. "Honestly? I don't know, Joyce. Everything about this is a goddamn nightmare."

"You said the Gate business was finally over. Remember, last year?"

"It is now." Joyce, Hopper and Murray all snorted in simultaneous disbelief. The doctor held out his hands, looking genuinely distressed. "Look, I saw the Gate close myself, Joyce. And we're keeping our eyes out for any suspicious activity. If they try anything, we'll know. No way in hell this is ever happening again."

*Third time's a charm, huh?* Hopper growled.

Joyce didn't bother with a response. She just stared at Owens, her face carefully blank as she took another puff from her cigarette.

"Sir?" The door opened abruptly, revealing a soldier in full tactical gear. Looking relieved at the interruption, Owens murmured a pardon and slipped out of the van.

The instant the doors closed Murray leaned over to whisper into Joyce's ear. "There's no fucking way they don't know. We can't trust them."

"Yeah, no shit, Murray." Joyce intoned darkly.

Hopper didn't bother lowering his voice; *Someone in the government invested a lot in that research. Stands to reason if they're no longer allowed to pursue it themselves in Hawkins...*

"If they can't continue the project, why not let the Russians do it instead?" Joyce murmured. This day continued to get worse.

Frantically gesturing for her to lower her voice, Murray shielded his mouth to muffle his already barely audible whisper. "And complete

the research and get their investment back? I wouldn't put it past them. But we shouldn't discuss here because--" Murray tapped his ear and waved his finger around the ceiling of the van, mouthing, "They're listening."

Joyce turned to look at Hopper, but to Murray it must have looked like she was watching for Owens. "Alexi said that Hawkins is like a healed-over wound. So, if that's true then re-opening any kind of wound just makes it worse, right?"

*I'm no scientist, but yeah...doesn't sound good.*

"Let's not talk about this here, ok?" Murray broke in, his voice high and panicky. Joyce ignored him. Her eyes hadn't left Hopper's.

*You think he's lying about the Gate being closed?*

"I don't know. But I think this means it will never really be over." Joyce said softly, as the doors swung open to reveal the dark, misting parking lot. It was hard to adjust her eyes after the cold, sterile lighting inside the van but she could barely make out the figure of the soldier who had interrupted jogging back to re-group with the soldiers supervising the smoking remains of the mall. Closer to the van she could see another parked military vehicle. Jonathan and Will were in the backseat with El between them. Her heart seized up as Jonathan raised his face from comforting El to look out the window. Their eyes met and the brief stricken look on his face communicated everything Joyce needed to know.

She ground her cigarette into the single ashtray in the middle of the table. "We're done here." She told Owens, climbing past ghost-Hopper into the parking lot. She could hear Murray displacing the table as he scrambled out behind her.

Owens reached out to touch her arm. "Joyce, I just wanted to say...I know things are already difficult being a single mother and raising two kids—"

"We'll be fine." Joyce immediately cut him off, ripping her arm away. "I'll figure it out."

"I know you will. But if you need anything, if it gets too much...just give me a call, ok?" His gaze turned to the vehicle where the children were waiting, El slumped against Jonathan's shoulder. "And I'm so sorry about Jim. He was a good man."

A good man. She knew Owens said it with genuine feeling but all she could feel was the ringing emptiness of the statement, how utterly insufficient it was. Instead she nodded wordlessly and reached for the passenger side car door. Murray beat her, quickly opening it and slipping inside.

"I hope it's ok if I stay the night. I...uh...don't want them to know where I live." He hissed, jerked his head to the soldier sitting beside him at the steering wheel.

Joyce was too exhausted to argue. She climbed into the passenger seat and shut the door, twisting to look at the kids in the back.

"Sorry about the wait." She said quietly. She reached out to take El's hand. "You're going to stay with us for the time being, ok? While you heal..."

"What about the cabin?" The girl asked weakly.

"I'm so sorry, sweetie. We can go get your things later, ok?"

El leaned her head back against the seat, squeezing her eyes shut. Pain twisted her features, making Joyce's heart break. She released El's hand.

The vehicle began to move. She assumed the soldier already knew their address because he didn't ask for it. As she turned to face the front, she could see Murray clearly nodding off beside her. Joyce pressed her head against the cold glass of the window, closing her eyes. The car was silent, except for the rumble of the tires on the road. Wearily, she opened her eyes and gazed out into the darkness. In the dark reflection she could see the soldier with his eyes straight ahead, Murray's slumped form and Hopper seated beside her.

"This isn't real." She whispered into the glass, her voice lost in the drone of the tires. Part of her knew he could hear her.

Sure enough, Hopper's head to turned to meet her gaze in the reflection. *I wish it wasn't.*

"You're not real."

At this Hopper shrugged, a little offended. *I don't know about that. That's a bit of an assumption—*

"I saw you die."

*But you also said you didn't see it. So...*

Joyce whipped her head to look at Hopper. He was exactly like she remembered him before Starcourt—whole, unharmed, disgruntled. He looked like she could reach out and touch him. God, how badly she wanted to reach out and feel his warmth. Instead it was just this hallucination, gazing at her with guarded eyes. It made her insides twist with grief. "There was nothing left."

"Sorry, Ma'am? Did you say something?" The solider spoke up.

Joyce and Hopper exchanged an alarmed look. "Um. Our exit is coming up...on the left..."

"Yes, Ma'am." The vehicle began to slow as the soldier applied the brake. Joyce glanced around the rest of the vehicle. Murray was still sound asleep and the kids were slumped, completely unconscious in the back seat. El and Will were leaning against each other, looking so sad and fragile it made Joyce's chest tighten.

Owens offer had seemed innocent on the surface, but she felt the threat lurking under the surface. Now that El was out of hiding the government would be looking for any excuse to get her back. If they so much as suspected Joyce was unfit to take care of any of her children, say if she was hallucinating a dead police chief...Joyce leaned her forehead back against the window and tried to beat the panic thrumming through her veins into submission. No way in hell were they going to take her children away from her.

*You need to rest, Joyce. You're running on fumes.*

"Do me a favor and don't say anything until we get home, ok?" She

whispered desperately. "You can haunt me as much as you like later but for now, please, please be quiet."

There was a beat as Hopper studied her, his face unreadable. Then he nodded, turning to look out at the front windshield. Maybe by tomorrow this hallucination would be over. This cruel figment of her imagination would be gone and she could focus on what happens next. She finally closed her eyes, wondering why the prospect of that made her so sad.

## 2. Chapter 2

*Joyce?*

The voice was soft but enough to jar her from sleep. Joyce sat up, searching the bedroom with bleary eyes. From the drab light filtering in through the blinds, she guessed it was late morning. She glanced at the other side of the bed where El was curled up in the fetal position, her face completely buried in her pillow. The girl's back rose and fell in deep breaths. Joyce felt a pang. The poor girl was completely drained.

Except for El and herself the room was empty. Joyce rose gingerly from the bed to tiptoe to the cracked door. She stepped out into the hallway. Still empty. The boys' doors were closed completely. Wandering into the kitchen, she could see the pale orb of Murray's head resting on the couch in the living room where he'd collapsed the night before. She scrubbed a hand over face, wincing as her eyes began to sting from sweat and days-old makeup. She crossed the hallway into the bathroom, flipped on the light and froze when she saw the woman in the mirror staring back at her.

She looked like absolute mad woman; her face haggard, eyes puffy, dried blood on her forehead and still in that hideous uniform. Furiously she undid the buttons, practically throwing it on the floor. She was going to burn the damn thing the first chance she got. Undressed, she could see small cuts and bruises dotting her body. There was an especially nasty black and blue one along her ribs where the Russian assassin had thrown her against the control panels. She touched it gingerly, grimacing.

*That's a good look.*

"JESUS—" She whirled, gasping at the specter sitting on the edge of the bathtub. She felt the cold ceramic of the sink press into her back as she stepped back. Hopper didn't move, he was just looked at her, lips curled in a slight smirk.

*You're going to want to ice that.*

“What are you—how?” She ripped a towel from the hanger on the wall by the sink and hurriedly wrapped it around herself. “Why are you here?”

*You wanted to talk in private, right?*

“Not in my bathroom!” Joyce became aware of how high and loud her voice was bouncing back at her from the ceramic tiling. What would the kids think if they heard her talking to herself? Almost as if reading her mind, Hopper grinned back at her. She lowered her voice into a furious whisper. “Why are you still here? You’re supposed to be gone.”

*It’s good to see you too, Joyce.* Hopper groused, completely ignoring her first question. *Back in the car you said I could haunt you later—*

“So, you are a ghost. And this is, what? Revenge?”

*Revenge? You mean for the time you dragged me home unconscious and stripped me? This does kind of feel like karma, huh?* Hopper reached out quickly as though to tug the bottom hem of her towel and Joyce recoiled instinctively. He laughed at her horrified expression.

“Not for that, idiot. For...” Joyce was unable get out the rest of the words.

Hopper’s face softened when he realized what she couldn’t say. *Come on, you know it wasn’t your fault. There wasn’t a choice.* He watched her lower herself onto the edge of the bathtub beside him and smiled at her tenderly. *This isn’t revenge, Joyce. Not even close.*

She buried her head in her hands, exhaling shakily. “Jesus Christ, I’m actually losing my mind.”

*No, you’re not. Come on now—*

“Hop. My options are I’m seeing a ghost or my mind is making you up. Either way—” Joyce gestured chopply, her voice tense.

*I’ve told you I heard Sara after she passed. I saw her too. In the corner of my eye. Maybe this is your way of getting through.*

“A coping mechanism?”

Hopper nodded. *You're not losing anything. We both know you're made of stronger stuff than that.*

Joyce was still processing this new information. “My coping mechanism is arguing with a grumpy dead police chief.”

*You forgot handsome, but I'll forgive you for that. I mean, you could try my coping mechanisms by way of prescription drugs, hard liquor and lots and lots of meaningless sex.*

She let out an inadvertent snort, wiping her nose quickly with the back of her hand, glaring at him affectionately. “I don't think those are options for me, Hop.”

*Can't say they solved anything. But they certainly passed the time.* He was gazing at her with a tenderness that made her heart seize up.

“What?”

*Just thinking about the whole 'you-imagining-I'm-still-here' thing. Maybe you cared more than you let on.*

“You said you were a ghost.”

*That was my original theory, but I'm beginning to think hallucination is more flattering.*

“Well, maybe I do miss your...stupid face...just a little.” Hopper grinned back her. The weight in her chest had eased considerably as they'd fallen back into a familiar conversation. But in following pause, Hopper's eyes flickered almost imperceptibly to her lips and all at once the warmth in her chest became tainted with some bitterly painful. She looked away. “What now?”

*What do you mean?*

“So, say this is temporary and I'm not losing my mind.” Hopper nodded in agreement. “What do we do about El? I can't keep her hidden like you did, that's not...possible.” She hated how helpless that made her sound, but they had to face reality. “What do I do if

they come for her?”

*Technically she should be erased from their records. Emphasis on the should. And with any luck she won't be traced to Starcourt. But if worse comes to worse I think you can take them.*

“But what about the Gate? If Hawkins is the one place in the world it can be opened...” Joyce watched Hopper’s face darken and he glared down at the floor. “Hop. I know you tried to make Hawkins safe, but we don’t really have a choice, do we?” When he didn’t respond she sighed. “I don’t know how to make this better.”

*You can't.* It wasn’t accusatory, but a statement of fact.

“It just gets easier with time?”

*Yeah.*

They sat there in silence, both staring at the far wall.

“How long will you,” She gestured to vaguely. “Be here?”

Hopper shrugged. *I guess until you work through your survivor's guilt or decide you don't want me around...*

A very long time, then. Joyce squared her shoulders. If she could handle Will’s disappearance and recovery, she could surely handle a psychic child and a grumpy ghost. “I better take that shower.” Joyce stood, running a hand through her greasy hair. He just nodded thoughtfully, not moving. She raised an eyebrow. “Hop? A little privacy?”

*Ah. Sure. I'll just be outside. Not peeking.* He moved to the door, glancing furtively over his shoulder.

### 3. Chapter 3

The next few days were a lethargic blur. El slept constantly, only waking up for liquids, food and the pain meds that Joyce plied on her. Most of Joyce's time was spent keeping a wary eye on the girl's leg, agonizing over whether it would become infected or not. A military medic had stitched up the wound at the scene but since then she had avoided any other medical institutions. In truth, the leg seemed to be the least painful thing for El. Sleep didn't seem to bring much relief from the jarring reality of her father's absence. When she'd wake up whimpering, Joyce was seated beside her on the bed, stroking El's hair as the girl tried to go back to sleep. Hopper was permanently seated on the floor by El's side of the bed, back pressed against the wall, arms resting on his knee. His expression wavered between disgruntled and furious. Joyce knew it was all self-directed, but it didn't make any less off-putting.

"Your face is going to freeze that way." She murmured, carefully smoothing the covers over El's sleeping form.

*This is all my fault. I should have been there.*

Joyce collapsed on the floor beside him, leaning her head against the wall. "You did everything you could."

*A lot of good that did.*

The urge to reach out and grab his hand was so strong. Instead she just sat with him in silence, letting her unfocused gaze rest on the ceiling fan. She wasn't sure how long it was before she heard the phone ring. Immediately she could hear Jonathan's footsteps padding down the hall to pick it up. El shifted a little at the second ring but the third was abruptly cut off and she settled back into a deep sleep. Joyce heaved a sigh, closing her eyes. Thanks to the thin walls she could just barely hear the murmur of Jonathan's voice. There was a long pause and then she heard him speak again, this time more assertively but in jerky, short bursts. Like he was trying to interject but the other person wasn't letting him get a word in edgewise. Joyce rolled her head to the right and frowned at Hopper. "Do you think...?"

*Bald Eagle? I'd put money on it.*

"Mom?" Jonathan cracked the door to her bedroom. Joyce had to wave her arm to make herself seen in the corner. He jerked his head towards the end of the house with the phone. "Murray's on the phone."

Hopper let out a lackluster whoop that made her bite down a grin. The day after Starcourt Murray had woken up, raided the fridge, liberated the vodka from the cabinet under the sink and disappeared without so much as word. "Tell him I'm busy." Joyce whispered loudly.

"He says it's urgent." Jonathan loud-whispered back. He looked equally as frustrated. "I think you should talk to him."

*Murphy doesn't do social calls.* Hopper gave her a resigned look. *You should probably take it.*

Joyce relented, forcing herself to her feet and out into the hallway. Jonathan eased the door close and followed her to the dining room where the receiver rested face down on a message table under the phone.

"Did he say what he wants?"

"He wants to talk to Will?" Jonathan stuffed his hands in his back pockets, eying the phone agitatedly. "I told him Will was out."

"Will? Why, Will?" There was a spark of fear in her voice. Down the hall, Will peeked out of his bedroom.

Jonathan lowered his voice. "He said he needs to speak to him about the Upside Down."

Pure ice shot down Joyce's spine, followed by a pure blinding rage. "Like hell."

Jonathan held her back before she could grab the phone. "I know, I know. But he also said it's about Hopper." Joyce felt herself freeze.

"I think you should talk to him, Mom." Jonathan reached out and

gingerly passed her the phone.

She stared at the phone in her hand, then took a deep breath and brought the receiver to her mouth. Her voice was surprisingly calm to her own ears. "What do you want, Murray?"

"Took you long enough." He sounded more harassed than normal, his words clipped and frantic. "Has anyone from the government called you?"

"Just a call from Owens to check in." She turned to where Jonathan and Will were hovering in the hallway. She pointed to her bedroom and mouthed, 'Can you watch her?' The boys slipped into the bedroom. "Is that why you called? To check up on us?"

"I was thinking about the night at Starcourt—" His words came in a flood, spilling out in one incomprehensible wave. When Joyce raised her eyes from the dining room floor, she noticed that Hopper had joined her. He was pacing the length of the dining room and living room in slow measured steps. For some reason today he was in his uniform, twisting the brim of his hat in his hands. Every now and then he'd cast glances at Joyce, meeting her eyes with a slight raise of his eyebrows. He grinned when she rolled her eyes and mimed strangling Murray with her freehand.

There was a sudden accusatory burst. "Joyce, are you listening?"

"Uh huh."

"I said 'you didn't see Jim when you shut down the machine, right?'"

"Murray, I told you this already. I don't want to talk about this anymore."

"You didn't see him?"

"No!" Joyce threw up her hand. "Is that all? I'm hanging up now."

Just as she was about to slam the phone back in its case on the wall, she could hear Murray yell; "Jim's alive!"

She froze, slowly bringing the phone back to her ear.

“You didn’t see him as you turned the key and the Gate was still open.” Joyce opened her mouth to interrupt but he rushed on. “What if he’s not dead, he’s just in the he Upside Down?”

Hopper was at her side now, leaning against the wall, with his bright eyes trained on her. She stared back him, not breaking eye contact.

“That’s...that’s not possible.” Joyce said softly, stricken.

“I just explained why it is! Were you even listening to me?”

Joyce continued to ignore him. “When Will was in the Upside Down he sent me signs. Flickering lights, phone calls, playing music. I haven’t had any of that.”

“Well, Jim’s not the brightest lightbulb—”

Hopper’s face crumpled in irritation. *Fuck you too, Murray.*

“It’s not an intelligence thing, it just happens.” Joyce snapped. “When Hopper and I were there Jonathan said the same thing happened when we were in my house in the Upside Down. Just being alive there, weird shit happens.”

“And if he’s just injured, unable to communicate?”

That was a terrifying option. She covered the mouthpiece and looked at Hopper in horror. He shook his head, clearly insulted. *Doesn’t check out.*

“But—”

*Like you said, no weird phone calls. No flickering lights. You don’t think the first thing I’d do is try to reach you and El to let you know?*

“What if you’re hurt and you can’t?” She asked softly.

*That’s not really an option, now is it?* There was no uncertainty in his voice. *I’d still find a way back to you and El.*

“Joyce?”

She removed her hand. “Murray—he’s not in the Upside Down.” He tried to speak over her but she raised her voice until she was shouting. “No, he would have told me. Will sent me plenty of signs and there’s been nothing!”

“Well, we could find out for ourselves—”

Rage flashed over Hopper’s face as he reached out to grab the phone. Joyce jerked back, realizing belatedly he couldn’t steal it even if he tried. She glared at him as she said, “The Gates are closed. How the hell would we even get there?”

“Fire up your little psychic. She can open it easy.”

“Fuck no.” Hopper and Joyce said simultaneously. She continued, “She’s still healing. She doesn’t have her powers.”

“Finding her lost dad seems like a good motivation—”

“You’re not telling her a word of this.” Joyce hissed into the phone. “And you’re not talking to my son either!”

*You tell Murray if he breathes a word of this I’ll personally—*

Joyce threw up a finger to shush him, already many stages ahead of him in levels of rage. “If any of my children hear about any of this, I will personally come to your bunker and shove my foot right up your ass. You hear me?”

“Just like that? You’re going to leave your boyfriend to die??”

Joyce lowered her voice to the tone she used to give ultimatums when arguing with her ex. “You find me a Gate, I’ll go. But I’m not risking El.”

An incorporeal hand gripped the phone, Hopper drew in close. He looked livid. *No, there’s no fucking way you’re risking yourself.*

She covered the mouthpiece to hiss back, “Oh, yeah and I should just let you die?”

He gave her a dumbfounded look as though he couldn’t understand

why she'd think there was another option. *YES!*

"We need the girl, Joyce. Without her it will take us months or years to break into that kind of facility. And by then it will be too late."

Hopper gave her an infuriatingly smug 'see, there you go' nod.

"She's hasn't been awake for more than eight hours in four days." Joyce felt as though this conversation had taken a physical toll on her body. She pinched the bridge of her nose, feeling a mounting pressure in her forehead. "Right now, she's just an injured, grieving child who needs to rest."

There was a stretch of silence as Murray absorbed this news. "Well, that makes me sound like a real asshole." Hopper and Joyce rolled their eyes. "Well, if you get any signs from Jim, you let me know immediately."

"Sure." Joyce said curtly, ready to be done. "Don't say anything to El. I'm not raising her hopes only to crush them again."

"Are you talking about the girl, or yourself?" Murray sounded so goddamn self-satisfied she could punch him in the throat.

"Goodbye, Murray. You owe me for the vodka." She slammed the phone back in its housing and turned as though to storm down the hall to the bedroom but she stopped, twisting to look back at Hopper.

He gave her a tight twist of his lips. *I didn't know Murray cared so much. It's kind of sweet.*

Joyce snorted, running a hand over her face and trying to regulate her breathing. Once calmed she strode to the bedroom and eased the door open.

Jonathan was seated on the edge of the bed, watching Will and El. Will was sprawled on top of the covers beside El, a comic book held aloft so the two of them could read it together. They turned to look at Joyce as she entered. She forced a smile. "Hey, you're awake! You hungry?"

El shook her head solemnly.

“El likes Wonder Woman so I was showing her the Justice League.” Will explained. “Is that ok?” Joyce sat down beside him, gently brushing his hair from his forehead. It amazed her sometimes, the way Will instinctively understood people. He didn’t get it from her—and definitely not from Lonnie. The only thing that worried her about Will’s gentle nature is that it often made him ignore his own needs. But he was a strong one, he’d survived the Upside Down and the Mindflayer. He was stronger than all of them.

She smiled down at him. “Well, she has good taste.”

“I like Martian Manhunter.” Will pointed out the character to El. “He can disguise himself as anyone he wants and can move things with his mind, like you can.”

“I thought Aquaman was your favorite.” Jonathan teased, grinning at Will’s look of utter disgust.

“Aquaman is no one’s favorite.” Will explained to El. “He just talks to fish.”

El’s brow furrowed. “Does he do anything else?”

Will shook his head and turned the page. “Nope. He’s pretty lame.”

“Pretty lame.” She echoed, soft brown eyes searching the new pages.

Joyce watched them for a beat, marveling at the ease with the Will and El shared the comic. Thanks to Hopper’s rants she knew that Mike had spent nearly every waking hour with El and from Will’s miserable demeanor this summer she knew Will must harbor some resentment at El for monopolizing his best friend. But in this moment, she didn’t see any trace of that. When El pointed to something on the page, Will eagerly pulled a different comic book from the pile to explain. His enthusiasm was drawing El in, her face softening as she studied the pages.

Joyce hadn’t discussed what was going to happen next with the boys. It was a discussion she had feared and in the face of more urgent things had been able to push aside. Maybe it wouldn’t be such a hard thing for them to accept. She met Jonathan’s gaze and he smiled

softly, hopefully.

“Well, I’m going to start dinner. Let me know when you guys get hungry. El, sweetie, you feel any pain you call for me, ok?”

“Ok.” El’s voice was small and husky from disuse.

“Who’s your favorite Justice League member?” Will directed this to his brother, who was cross-legged on the bed now.

Jonathan shrugged. “I don’t read stuff like that anymore, you know that.”

“You still read Tales from the Crypt!”

“That’s different—”

“What? How is that different?”

Joyce slipped out into the hallway, where Hopper was watching from the doorway. Will had levered himself onto his elbows, the comic books now abandoned on El’s lap. He and Jonathan were going at it, talking excitedly and gesturing wildly. El’s gaze was darting between them as the boys debated. For the first time since Starcourt the ghost of a smile touched her lips.

Joyce heard Hopper exhale in relief as she eased the door closed. He followed her into the kitchen. His voice was low, but warm. *They’re good kids.*

“It’s miracle they turned out as well as they did.” She leaned over the sink to fill a pan with water, her eyes migrating up to the light over the sink. She gazed at it, part of her desperately hoping the light would flicker.

## 4. Chapter 4

The evening air was still holding onto the day's heat when she made it out to the porch. El was fast asleep, full of mac and cheese and painkillers. The boys had retired to their own rooms, Jonathan to call Nancy and Will on his walkie talkie to chat with Mike and the rest of the gang. Joyce had requested that the kids give El a week to begin healing before coming over. She wondered if that had been a mistake as she sucked aggressively on her cigarette. But there was something more urgent gnawing at her.

*Careful, your face will freeze that way.* Hopper had, of course, joined her on the front porch. He was slouched in the porch swing behind her.

Joyce carefully smoothed her furrowed brow. "I can't stop thinking about what Murray said."

*Murray's...excitable. That's how he can believe in so many conspiracies.*

"But he's not wrong, right?" Joyce pointed to him with her cigarette. "I didn't see you when I turned the keys. My eyes were closed."

Hop groaned, heaving himself forward so that his elbows rested on his knees. *I think you're missing the most obvious part.* When she looked at him blankly, he held out his arms dramatically. *Ghost. Means I'm not here or in the Upside Down or anywhere. Just...dust.*

"But that's the thing Hop, I don't think you are ghost."

*You really think after all the shit we've seen that ghosts aren't possible?*

"I don't know what to believe. Hallucination, ghost or whatever." Joyce chewed on a nail on her free hand, staring out at the dark driveway. "But something doesn't feel right."

*Is that what your gut tells you or what you want to believe?*

"Doesn't really make a difference, does it?" Joyce muttered. She hastily inhaled one last puff of cigarette, before letting it fall and grinding it out with her heel. "I'm not going to be able to sleep until I

know for certain.” She darted into the house, grabbing her purse and keys and easing the front door closed.

Joyce. Hopper sounded alarmed. *What are you doing?*

She ignored him, already making her way to the Pinto.

*Joyce?*

She slid into the driver’s seat and jammed the key into the ignition.

Hopper was in the passenger seat now where she had previously tossed her purse, one arm bracing the back of her driver’s headrest. He looked panicked. *Joyce, stop! Whatever you’re going to do you shouldn’t do this alone. You need backup.*

“I’ve got you, right?” She laughed hollowly. “If something happens you can, like...haunt them or whatever.”

*I can’t do shit, Joyce, and you know that.* He growled back. She was already pulling down their long drive to get to the main road. *What if something happens to you? Who will take care of our kids?*

Joyce didn’t have an answer for that, so she deflected. “You really don’t want to know? If you’re alive, you don’t want to be saved?”

*I just think it’s already a little fucking late for that one, don’t you?!* His shout echoed in the tiny car.

“El needs you! We need you!” Joyce roared back. There was no reply, just silence. When she dragged her eyes away from the dark road to look at him, he was glaring out the passenger side window. “Jesus, Hop. Why are you so against me saving you?”

*Doesn’t do anyone any fucking favors if you die, that’s why. I’m not worth it. I’m not!* Hopper raised his voice to drown out her protest. *This is called adulting, Joyce. This is called being a parent because we put the welfare of our children over our own. And right now, the person she needs is you.* When she didn’t answer his voice lowered, pleading. *Please go home.*

She didn’t slow the car or even look at him. The Pinto rumbled on,

wheels humming on the pavement.

*Jesus, why are you so stubborn?* He grumbled.

“You go home then.” She shot back.

*No. You know I’m not going to do that.* He settled back into the seat. When he finally spoke, his tone was somewhere between resigned and amused. *Where to, Puppet Master?*

Joyce mouthed the words ‘puppet master’, considered pursuing it and immediately dropped it. “Hess Farm and the Laboratory. We didn’t find anything last time but maybe we missed something.”

*If I was alive in the Upside Down – but I’m not—I would try to get to the Laboratory.*

“Maybe they had Alexi working on another portal?”

Hopper slid his hat over his face. *Seems unlikely.* He mumbled.

“Well, stranger things have happened, right?”

There was no reply. Asleep or just ignoring her, Joyce was just grateful Hop had stopped trying to fight her on this one.

---

Hess Farm was, as Hopper predicted, a total bust. After searching the surrounding woods, they had entered the abandoned house and found the day bed entrance already open. Hopper had hovered anxiously at her shoulder as she searched the dark basement. Whatever machines Alexi had been building were silent and dark. The concrete walls smooth and undeniably solid. She tossed the flashlight into the backseat and plopped into the driver’s seat, resting her head on the steering wheel. Part of her knew she should feel relieved that they hadn’t found another portal. Instead she heaved a soft curse and started the vehicle.

*Well, that was disappointing.* The over-exaggerated innocence in his voice was grating. He yawned loudly. *It’s pretty late, we should go home and search the Lab tomorrow night when we’re fresh, right?*

The Pinto was at the end of the driveway. A left-hand turn would take her back home, a right to the Lab. For a split second she hesitated. Then she jerked the steering wheel to the right, ramming her foot on the accelerator, causing the Pinto to whip around roughly. It was petty, but she had to admit the disappointment weighing on her chest eased a little when Hop's smugness immediately dissipated into petulant silence.

The roads in Hawkins were completely deserted. The gate to the Lab was still unlocked, the charade of security long since abandoned. She pulled up the entrance of the building and parked.

*Why don't we do this tomorrow? You know when it's light outside and we can see everything...*

Joyce was already out of the car, striding to the front doors.

*Wait! Wait up, would ya?*

Very little had changed since their last stint of breaking and entering. Dead leaves littered the floor of lobby, her footsteps echoing eerily in the darkness. She made her way to the side staircase and began climbing down. She couldn't hear Hopper but in a weird, inexplicable way she could feel his presence close behind her, trailing her down the stairs.

At the bottom she took a deep breath and stepped into the room. Her sneakers crunched on the broken glass of the control room. The computer system was covered in fine layer of dust. As she stepped into the main area, swinging her flashlight she faced the far wall. The concrete covering the Gate was undisturbed. She approached the wall, trying to process how the silence could pound so loudly in her ears.

*Well. That's that.* Her face felt hot as she turned to look at Hopper. He waved his hand as though to shepherd her to the door. Instead she looked back at the wall and shook her head. *Joyce? Come on.*

Joyce pressed her forehead to the cold, unyielding surface of the wall and closed her eyes, focusing on fighting off the scream building in her lungs. "I don't know what I expected." Her voice quavered with

this confession. She knew what she'd hoped for, an easy solution, a sign that the universe was kinder than it appeared, not reinforcing what she already knew; some things are irreparably broken.

Hopper finally spoke and his words were slow and measured. *I know it doesn't feel this way now, but this is for the best. What would you do? Go into the Upside Down to get me by yourself?* He added defensively when she glared at him.

"Murray said there are probably other facilities. Maybe Owens could--"

*Joyce, please. You gotta let this go.*

She turned so that her back was against the wall, but she didn't move forward. She couldn't. Her eyes landed on the piece of equipment left behind by the lab, the wheeled platform she'd sat on while Hopper told her how he wanted to make Hawkins still feel like home for her. And when he said he had to escape those memories in New York.

*Let's go home?* Hopper reached out as though to take her hand. She didn't feel his touch but felt compelled forward. She didn't know how to tell him that all feelings of home in Hawkins had disappeared that night he'd left.

They were climbing the stairs when she heard it. A loud metallic series of thumps. Joyce and Hopper froze, staring at each other.

*You need to hide.*

Joyce bristled at his order, hissing, "Where? In the staircase?"

*You don't have much of a choice since you're not armed.* He glared at her when she brandished the flashlight. *A lot of good that's going to do against a gun.* Joyce ignored him and climbed past him, trying to move as quickly and quietly as possible. *What are you doing, don't go towards the noise!*

"I have to get to the car, right?" She snapped back. "No sense in going back." Some deep part of her was fed up with hiding and running. There wasn't much more they could take from her at this point.

At the door to the lobby she waited, listening but the building had fallen silent again. Carefully she cracked the door and peered out.

*The door squeaks. You're going to want to open it fast and move faster still when you're in the lobby.* Hopper whispered over her shoulder. It occurred to her that no one could hear him, but he still insisted on whispering. *Ready? On three. One...two...three!*

Joyce ripped the door open and sprinted for the front entrance. She heard a shout and footsteps following her. She shrieked, whirling and raising the flashlight to strike—and froze. “Jonathan?!”

“Mom?!” Her eldest boy was eyeing the flashlight raised over her head. “What’s going on?”

“I—” She immediately lowered it. “What are you doing here? You’re supposed to be at the house watching El and Will!”

“El woke up and called for you. We couldn’t find you so I called Nancy. We’ve been looking for you for hours.” He threw a panicked look around the facility. “Did something happen? Is the Mindflayer back?”

“No. I just...I had to check.” The sheer idiocy of what she’d done hit her all at once. In the dim light, Jonathan’s face was drawn and worried. After the stress of the last couple of days this was the last thing he needed. “I’m sorry.” She murmured, pulling him into a hug. “I’m so sorry.”

“It’s ok, Mom.” When he pulled away, he held onto her shoulders, studying her with concern. “Was it Murray’s phone call? What did he say?”

Joyce stepped away, wiping tears from her eyes and shaking her head. “It’s not important.”

“He said it was about Hopper. What did he mean?”

The man in question was watching from a few paces away, his arms crossed.

“Look, I don’t want you guys to get involved anymore. The Gate is

closed and you guys are safe. End of story.”

Her eldest looked at her in disbelief. “It’s too late for us not to be involved. Murray thinks Hopper is in the Upside Down, doesn’t he? You came here to check.”

Joyce’s voice rose, defensive. “And it was a mistake. I shouldn’t have left you guys—”

“No, you should have taken us with you!” Jonathan’s tone turned from angry to pleading. “We want to get him back as much as you do. You don’t have to take this on alone, we can help.”

*See? It’s not worth risking you or the kids.* As Hopper was making his way to the door, he placed a hand on her shoulder and said lowly, *You gotta let this go before someone else gets hurt, Joyce.*

“Jonathan?!” Joyce’s heart nearly stopped as the yell reverberated through the hall, a beam of light swinging around the corner.

“Nancy! I found her!” Jonathan waved and Nancy jogged to join them. Her hair was hastily thrown up in a bun, a light jacket thrown over a matching pajama set. She looked relieved when she saw Joyce.

“Mrs. Byers, I’m so glad you’re ok.”

“Hey, Nancy.” She greeted the girl sheepishly, then blinked. “Wait, then who is with El and Will?”

Jonathan shifted. “Oh, uh...”

“They’re in the car with the others.” Nancy supplied helpfully, ignoring her boyfriend’s warning glare.

“Others?”

*Goddammit.*

Joyce whirled and followed Hopper out of the building. Nancy’s vehicle was parked behind her Pinto. Three figures were perched on the hood of Nancy’s car, taking turns shining a flashlight into each other’s eyes and wrestling it away (Lucas, Dustin and Max). Someone

was seated in the back seat with the door open, facing out so that their legs dangled outside of the car (El) and the other two pacing by the back door (Mike and Will). Six pairs of eyes turned to her as she approached and four voices chorused; “Mrs. Byers!”

“Mom!” Will darted up to hug her. “What were you doing? Where have you been?”

“Is the Gate open again?” Mike was clutching Eleven’s hand tightly, eyes wide.

“Is it the Mindflayer?” Lucas leaned forward anxiously.

Dustin shouted. “The Russians?”

“Guys shut up!” Max elbowed them in the ribs. When she looked at Joyce, though, her eyes were worried. “It’s not, right?”

Joyce shook her head. “No, everything’s fine. It’s abandoned, no Gate, no Russians.”

“Did you find him?” Her voice was small and hoarse, but everyone went quiet, turning to look at El.

In her peripheral Hopper was stationed beside her, arms folded and full six-foot stature radiating pure rage. He appeared to be speechless.

Joyce felt her heart sink. “No.”

To Joyce’s dismay, El didn’t look away. “Is he in the Upside Down?”

“I—” Joyce swallowed, unsure how to answer. She turned to glare at Jonathan and Nancy. “Jonathan, what did you tell them?”

“Just what Murray told me over the phone—”

“Jonathan!”

Before she could lay into her eldest, Dustin chimed in, “But if the chief was in the Upside Down wouldn’t he have sent a sign? Like a radio message or something?”

Lucas nodded. "Yeah, just like Will did."

"If you were checking to see if there's an open Gate in Hawkins, why didn't you ask me?" Will looked at his mother, askance.

"Yeah, he's got Mindflayer Spidey Sense." Mike reminded her unnecessarily. "If there was any activity Will would know."

"Has there been anything weird at your house?" Nancy was talking to Jonathan behind Joyce.

"No, not that we've noticed."

"Maybe he's hurt and he can't—"

Dustin, Mike and Max simultaneously burst out, "Lucas!"

"I'm just saying!"

"Then we need to open it again to get him out."

"How? El's on low battery right now—"

El's face crumbled and Joyce lost it. "ENOUGH! All of you are going home right now! Your parents are going to lose their minds if they know you all snuck out at this time. Nancy!" Nancy stiffened in shock as Joyce whirled to face her. "Thank you for your help but if you wouldn't mind—"

"We're just trying to help!" The red-haired girl had slid off the vehicle.

"Yeah, we've done this before. We can figure it out!"

Joyce ran a hand over her face and looked at Hopper. He was looking over the kids, shaking his head. He was so much better at organizing them in crisis. She didn't know what to do.

"Mrs. Byers? We just want to help. I think we all owe him that." Nancy said softly.

Looking at the pure determination etched on their faces, Joyce felt

something like affection through the fear, anger and guilt. They were great kids, but they didn't know when to stop.

*They're going to get themselves killed.*

She had to end this. No more risking the kids for answers.

Joyce breathed in, turning to El. "He's not in the Upside Down. I'm sorry." El's eyes widened.

"How do you know?" Mike challenged.

"It's not possible."

"But how—"

"I saw it happen." Joyce lied, feeling nauseated even as she said the words. "I saw—he was just gone." The group processed in silence. El was staring at the Lab, her face unreadable. "I know you all cared about Hopper and you love El and you just want to help but...." Hopper was at her side now, so close she should be able to feel the warmth of his shoulder. "We have to look after each other now." She finished lamely. "That's what Hop would have wanted."

The kids were silent as they processed this.

Finally, Nancy cleared her throat. "Mom gets up in another hour and we still have to drop off everyone." She directed this to her brother. Mike shot her an angry look. "Well, she's going to get suspicious if she notices my car's not in the driveway."

Mike muttered something and turned to El, gently tugging on her arm to get her attention.

As the kids were put into motion, Joyce turned to face the Lab so the they couldn't see her and flashed Hopper a miserable look. He touched her arm to reassure her. *No, you did good.* Joyce rolled her eyes, fighting back tears. *It's not a lie.*

"But it's not the truth either." Joyce breathed.

*All we can do is try to keep them safe.*

When Joyce turned back Mike and Max were helping El to the front passenger seat of her Pinto.

Will was already in the backseat, his forehead pressed against the window. She followed his gaze to the looming building behind her and swallowed. Just keep them safe. All she could do was wonder how she could possibly succeed where she had already failed so many times before.

## 5. Chapter 5

El was silent the entire car ride back. Joyce kept throwing worried looks at her, but El just stared out the window into the darkness. When she looked in the rearview mirror, Hopper's huge form was smooshed between Will and Jonathan in the middle seat. It would have been comical had the atmosphere of the car not been so heavy.

*You did the right thing, Joyce.*

She shook her head slowly, her lips barely moving as she mouthed; "I lied to a child that her father is dead."

*Again, not a lie.*

She didn't respond, focusing on the road. Once home, Joyce pulled the Pinto close to the house so they could help El onto the porch. In the living room she limped to the sofa and sank down on the far cushion.

"Are you...how are you feeling?" Joyce asked softly.

The girl was staring at the floor. She sniffled and wiped her nose, turning to Joyce with red-rimmed eyes. "Black hole."

"What?"

El gestured, her fingers curling into a fist and pulling it to her chest. Her voice was barely audible. "I destroy everything."

"No, El. None of this is your fault. Sometimes things just..." Joyce couldn't manage to finish that sentence. Things like this didn't just happen, they weren't supposed to be remotely possible. Nothing that had transpired in Hawkins was normal. Instead she repeated, lamely, "It wasn't your fault."

El scrubbed her face roughly with her forearm and rose shakily to her feet. "Thank you, Mrs. Beyers." It was a poor facsimile of a smile—her teeth were gritted, eyes feverishly shiny.

Something deep in Joyce's gut panged in warning. "You're

welcome?”

El hugged her, tightly. Joyce hugged her back, but when she looked at Hopper, he looked alarm. She wasn't the only one sensing something was off. When El stepped away she gave the boys a watery smile. “Thank you, Jonathan. And Will, I'm sorry.”

Will exchanged a confused look with his brother. “For what?”

“I did it. I opened the Gate. I let the Demagorgon out. You hate me.” It wasn't a question, just a statement.

“I don't—” Will flushed, throwing Joyce a panicked look. “I mean—”

“That won't happen anymore.” El was backing away. She was between Joyce and the front door. “I promise.”

*Joyce. Hopper said warningly. Stop her.*

“Sweetie, what are you talking about?” Joyce held out her arm, speaking low and slowly like she was trying to calm a baby deer. “Where are you going?”

Hopper had moved to block the door, his voice low and panicked. *You can't let her leave, Joyce. Please.*

The girl moved slowly due to her injured leg, but every step Joyce took towards her El was getting further and further away. “It's the only way to protect you all. Kali warned me and I didn't listen.”

“I don't know who Kali is, but she's wrong.”

*If they find her, they'll put her back in that lab. She doesn't have her powers, she can't protect herself.*

“El, you've saved us, you helped us find Will. He wouldn't be here without you—”

Frustration tinted the girl's voice, clearly upset that Joyce wasn't understanding. She spoke quickly and chopply. “Because of me the Mindflyer got through and hurt Will and killed Max's brother and all those people. Everything that's happened is because of me. I killed

Hop—”

“No, you didn't.” She stepped forward as El took another step back. “I know everything hurts right now, but it's not your fault.” She wasn't focusing anymore on what El was saying, just on the disappearing distance between the girl and the door.

“I can't stay.” As El turned, Joyce lunged. The girl shrieked as Joyce pulled her backwards, both of them crumbling to the floor.

“Mom!?”

“Mom, what the hell—”

El was twisting and screaming, but somehow Joyce gathered the girl in her arms and held on as tightly as she could.

“What the fuck, Mom?”

She fixed Jonathan and Will in a glare. “Either bring me a box of tissues or go to bed.”

It was several minutes until El's thrashing stopped, her body heaving as she buried her face against Joyce's shoulder. Joyce rubbed her back, resting her cheek on the girl's head. El's voice was barely audible, “Let me go.”

“No.” Joyce replied softly. “I'm sorry, but I won't.”

“I hurt Will.”

“No, you didn't.”

“I killed Hop.”

Hopper was kneeling beside them, his expression absolutely wretched.

“No, that wasn't your fault.” Joyce whispered, meeting Hopper's bright blue eyes. “You didn't do anything wrong.”

“Please.” El's voice cracked. “Let me go?”

"You know I can't do that, Sweetie," Joyce gently smoothed wet strands of hair from El's face. "You're still just a kid. Adults are supposed to protect you, even though we...fail sometimes." El squinted at her, scrubbing her nose with her sleeve. "Did I hurt your leg?"

El touched her leg gingerly and winced. The reality of what she had done, tackling a wounded child in her own living room walloped Joyce in the stomach. Joyce buried her face in her hands, trying to desperately to swallow her own sobs. Why was she so bad at this?

"Ms. Byers?" In the darkness of her hands, she could hear El's anxious voice. "What's wrong?"

"I could have hurt you!" Joyce exploded, tears leaking out of her cheeks. All remnants of calm completely and utterly gone.

Hopper didn't say anything as he sat beside her. He laid an invisible hand on her back, moving it in slow circles as she cried, huge wrenching sobs. The boys and El were frozen, staring at Joyce in horror.

"I'm ok. Mrs. Beyers?" El reached out to hug her. "It doesn't hurt, I promise." Joyce exhaled shakily, pulling herself together enough to check El's leg herself. Miraculously the stitches were still holding. "I'm sorry."

Joyce hastily wiped the tears off her face. "Sweetie, you don't need to apologize for anything. I'm just...it just came out."

Jonathan and Will were at their side. Joyce gestured for the boys to help El to the couch and they each took an arm and hefted her up. At her side Hopper's hand was still on her back.

*Thank you.* He murmured, his voice low in her ear.

She ignored him, shakily climbing to her feet. El was slumped on the couch, her head in her hands. Once more the boys hovered nearby, shooting each other uncomfortable looks.

"Thank you, boys." Joyce murmured, touching their shoulders and nodding to the back bedrooms. She squeezed past them to sit down

on the coffee table across from El. She waited until the boys left the living room before reaching out to gently grasp El's hands and pull them away from her face.

"You are definitely Hopper's kid. You know how I know?" El shook her head, her face still twisted from crying. Joyce gently smoothed wet strands of hair from her face. "Because that's something he would say. He took responsibility for a lot of things he couldn't control and beat himself up for years over it. I know he wouldn't want that for you."

El swallowed roughly, her shoulders shaking. This was a softer cry, not as violent. But she didn't let go of Joyce's hand. Joyce stroked her hair, pressing a kiss on El's bowed head. There was a rustle and Will sat down on the couch next to El. He placed a box of tissues between them.

"I don't blame you for the Demagorgon." Will told her softly. El squinted at him with red rimmed eyes. "You didn't ask for any of this. And if you hadn't helped Mike and the others, I would be dead right now."

El looked between Will and Joyce. Her breathing was ragged, her words coming out in shaky bursts. "B-but what if I stay and something else tries to hurt you? I don't...have my powers anymore I can't protect you—"

"Adults should be protecting you, El. You're still a child." Joyce squeezed El's hand. From the corner of her eye she saw Will's gaze drop to the floor. Another stab of guilt ran through her as she reached out to grab his hand too, forcing him to look up at her. "I'm going to do everything I can to keep you guys safe, ok?" Will and El nodded hesitantly.

"How?" El asked huskily.

"Well," Joyce laughed, taken back by the question. "I'm small but I'm feisty. You know, I can hold my own in a fight."

Will made a sound of disbelief.

"Hey, it's been a while," Joyce said defensively. "But when your dad and I used to hustle pool in Indianapolis, I got into a few scraps." She mimed a few punches, gently tapping Will on the chin with her fist. Will swatted her hand away, laughing. "Your mom can handle herself."

"You never said anything about that." Jonathan accused, leaning on the back of the sofa. "You said you hate pool."

"There's a lot you don't know about your old mom."

"I don't understand how swimming is going to help us." El sounded genuinely concerned.

"No, El, pool is a game—" Jonathan stopped when she craned her neck to look at him in confusion. "I'll explain later."

Hopper was now in the doorway of the living room and dining room, arms folded. His expression was neutral but she thought she saw something in his gaze. She looked away before it consumed her, refocusing on El. "I know you're scared about the future, but you're not alone."

Will piped up. "Because Byers look after each other, right?"

"Us freaks gotta stick together!" In an impressive show of younger brother reflexes, Will dived to the side to avoid Jonathan's hand. El was not so lucky, she squeaked in surprise as Jonathan ruffled her hair.

"Jonathan!" His mom chided.

"What? It's true! We got Zombie Boy," Will cringed, "Photo Creep," Jonathan pointed to himself, then at Joyce, "Crazy Christmas Lights Lady..."

Joyce squawked in protest, "Who says that?"

"And now Psychic Girl." He grinned down at El.

El looked at them all in turn. "But I don't have my powers."

"That's because you're still healing, Sweetie. Just give it time." Joyce assured her. She smoothed a hand over the girl's messy hair. "Everything gets better with time."

"Do you promise?"

"Promise." Will held out his pinky finger.

Joyce wrapped her pinky finger around his and winked. "Promise."

"Promise." Jonathan perched himself on the back of the couch to lean in.

El stared at their joined hands for a moment. As El intertwined her own pinky, she gave them a watery smile.

*That's my girl.* Hopper murmured appreciatively.

"Come on. It's way past time for all of you—all of us," she quickly corrected at Jonathan and Will's glares. "To be in bed."

After helping El get into bed, Joyce was back in the bathroom brushing her teeth.

*Hustling pool, huh?* He was leaning against the wall behind her, eyebrows raised. *Explains a lot.*

"Oh please. Like you're so perfect. That's not even the worse thing I've done—"

*You talking about the skinny-dipping incident? Do the boys know about that one?*

She felt her cheeks heat up. "I don't know what you're talking about."

## 6. Chapter 6

The kids hadn't been joking about the damages to the cabin. Joyce walked carefully, her sneakers crunching broken glass. She craned her neck to look at the hole punched in the ceiling. She felt her stomach plummet. Those kids had faced off against that monster alone while she and Hop had what? Galivanted off to chase some magnets?

*Figures. Finally got the place fixed up.* Hopper was pacing the room, glaring at the overturned shelves and furniture. *That Mind-fucker or whatever did quite a number.*

El's room had survived the impact. Joyce set down an empty cardboard box on the bed and began transferring clothes from the dresser into the box. A good number were large flannel shirts.

*They didn't fit anymore.* Hopper admitted sheepishly, sinking down onto the bed. *I guess the only good thing about a diet of pills, beer and cigarettes is that it keeps you relatively thin.*

Joyce smiled as she smooshed the clothes further down into the box. "People gain weight when they're happy, Hop. It's a good sign."

*You know El was barely 80 pounds when she came here? She was living off squirrels in the woods.* Joyce winced at the thought. Hopper's voice was low with rage as he continued. *Not that those bastards at the Lab took much better care of her. When I think about what they did to her...*

"I know." She said darkly.

*She didn't know what home was before coming here.* Hopper stood, running a hand over the walls. *You remember when I asked you to help me pick out the color?*

"Then you called me for backup because the boys started a paint fight." Joyce tried to bite back a grin, remembering how Hopper answered the door with green paint dripping off his moustache.

*The best part was hosing down those punks out back.*

Joyce laughed, remembering the kids screaming and darting away as Hopper mercilessly chasing them around the yard with the garden hose. She'd watched from the porch, breathless from laughter as the hose was jerked out of Hopper's hand by an invisible force and turned back on him.

"I never saw you run so fast."

He chuckled. *A lot of good memories here.* He ran a hand over the wall. *But you're not staying here, are you?*

Joyce looked down at her hands, chiding herself as a rush of nervous energy made her heart begin to pound. He wasn't even real, so why was it so hard to tell him? "Hawkins just isn't safe anymore, Hop. I mean—I guess technically it hasn't been safe for years now. But we know now it's not going to get better."

*Smirnoff doesn't know everything because of some fancy Soviet degree or whatever...*

"Hop." She said his name softly, pleadingly.

He just looked at her for a long time. Then he looked away, silence signaling defeat. The resignation was worse than anger somehow.

*I guess...I knew this was going to happen eventually. Where will you go?*

She shrugged. "I've been looking at some suburbs outside Chicago. Maybe Maine..."

Hopper snorted. *Maine? What the hell is in Maine?* When she didn't reply, he sighed. *What about New York City? Jonathan wants to go to NYU, right? If you lived close enough, he could commute in. And there are enough people you and the kids could blend in easily enough.*

Something about Hopper remembering Jonathan's dream to go to NYU warmed her. "You think a bunch of freaks from Hawkins can make it in New York City?"

*I did, for a while.*

"Until you had to leave? Outrun the memories?" When he shrugged

and turned away, she tried again, “You understand why I have to leave, right?”

*Of course. I just...I guess, selfishly I don't want to be left behind.* Hopper turned back to look at her and leaned against the door. *When you all leave, all I care about in Hawkins will be gone.*

Joyce felt a pang in her chest. “It’s the same for us, Hop. There’s nothing holding us here now.”

He studied her face intensely then nodded to the box of clothes. *Take my albums too. I want El to listen to good music.*

## 7. Chapter 7

Joyce wore a black dress even though the grave side service was blisteringly hot. She stood in the back of the small crowd, sweat trickling down her back as the pastor droned on about Heaven and trusting in Jesus—admittedly she wasn't paying a lot of attention. Across the sun scorched cemetery two other funeral services were being held. Considering the other thirty something funerals taking place, it was an impressive turn out for Hopper. Joyce had lived pretty much her whole life in Hawkins, except for the couple of years she spent in Indianapolis with Lonnie. She'd never known such a palpable feeling of grief and anxiety in the town. She'd known the appeal of Hawkins had always been surface-level, that below the surface was the same dark, twisted problems of every town, but—it felt like that illusion of safety had been shattered for good. She was glad she left El at home with the boys. It felt like the only thing she'd managed to get right these past few weeks.

“The Devil has made himself known in Hawkins. We must fight harder than ever to preserve our faith, my friends. As the good books says, ‘Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.’ We must all trust in God’s plan, as Hopper did--”

*You know I haven't been to church since before I left for Vietnam?* Apparently, Hopper couldn't even be bothered to dress up for his own funeral. He was in jeans and a t-shirt with aviator glasses, naturally unaffected by the heat, where Joyce felt a fine sheen of sweat on her skin. *They script this generic shit for people who nobody knew or gave a shit about.*

“Maybe we could add some anecdotes from your ex-lovers.” Joyce barely moved her lips. She had gotten much better at disguising their conversations.

*Glowing reviews of how great I was?* Joyce shook her head slightly, that was definitely not in the cards. *The only other people who knew me well enough would be Benny, but that's not possible. I dunno, the pharmacist? And you, I guess.*

“I hate public speaking. I wouldn’t know what to say.”

*Jim Hopper was the greatest, sexiest police chief I, Joyce Byers, have ever known. He was a decent cook, a connoisseur of music, an absolute tiger in the sack—*

“You forgot ‘full of himself.’”

*My biggest regret is standing up him for potentially the best date I would have ever had—*

“I apologized for that already. And you said it wasn’t a date.” Joyce shot back, watching as the small figures dressed in black on the far end of the cemetery shuffle back and forth. “I swear you’re the pettiest man I’ve ever—”

“Joyce?” The preacher was craning his neck to see her. “Would you like to say a few words?”

The mourners in front of her shuffled traitorously to the side to form a pathway to the grave. She didn’t move.

“Oh, I’m fine. I’m good.” She tried to wave her hands dismissively, but the crowd didn’t turn away. They just looked at her.

“I’m sure Jim would like to have a friend say a few words.”

*Yes. Yes, he would.* She didn’t need to look to know he was wearing a shit-eating grin. *Come on. This funeral already sucks, you couldn’t possibly make it worse.*

He did have a point.

Slowly, like she was moving underwater she made her way to the grave. On top of the empty casket was Hopper’s police photo. He looked official and miserable, clearly taken shortly after he returned from New York. The preacher gave Joyce a nod to encourage her, but when she turned to the small crowd she was at a loss for words.

“Uh...I mean...” Joyce swallowed looking everywhere desperately. “I guess I’ve known Hopper—I mean I knew Hopper a long time. Since elementary school. He was...always charming, I guess. I mean, not in

a good way. He was kind of an asshole in school. But a charming one, I guess. You could always count on him for a good time.” The preacher didn’t seem pleased with the language, but a few members of the crowd chuckled. “We used to share cigarettes under the stairs before sixth period, sneak into the school pool to get drunk and go skinny dipping—sorry, I’ll keep it appropriate.” Joyce quickly reassured the preacher. Hopper was grinning at her from the back of the crowd. Joyce smiled back, but felt her eyes drawn back to the portrait on the casket. “I didn’t see him for a long time after high school. We both got married, had kids. Uh...” As her mind turned over the next few sentences in her mind, she knew it wasn’t the most appropriate, but Hopper deserved a funeral where he was remembered for who he was, fully. “He wasn’t perfect. He had a lot of demons, but...he helped a lot of people. Despite everything he wanted to make Hawkins a safe place to live. No offense but I don’t believe in a greater plan, because I think if there was any sense in the universe he would be here still.” Hopper was no longer smiling. “He was a good man. And a hero and a good father. And my...best friend. I’m going to miss him. A lot.” Joyce fumbled the ending, her face burning. She raised her arms and let them fall back to her sides in defeat. The crowd was quiet as she made her way to the back.

“Thank you, Joyce. That was nice.”

The preacher was making his closing remarks when Hopper leaned down.

*You said we could never speak about the skinny-dipping thing.*

“Yeah, well...special occasion.”

## 8. Chapter 8

*This a fucking nightmare.*

“Language,” she murmured in warning.

*No one can fucking hear me anyway.* Hop was glaring at the surrounding people milling around the bar. *You know me. You think I would want this?*

“Wasn’t my idea. And if I have to suffer through it you do too.” Joyce murmured as one of the deputies stumbled onto the makeshift state at the back of the bar. In one arm he cradled the portrait of Hopper under his arm and wrenched the microphone out of the stand.

“Can I get everyone’s attention?” He yelled, despite having every eye in the bar trained on him. “Chief Hopper was a great boss. A real great son-of-a-bitch, he will be greatly missed and it just goes to prove there’s no time for any of us—” The melancholy start to *Time in a Bottle* kicked on the speakers.

*Jesus Christ.* Hopper growled, making as though to dive for the front door. Joyce swiped a hand through the air, gesturing for him to stay put.

“So, this one’s for you, Chief!” The drunk deputy bellowed, before starting it off very emotionally and very off key.

Joyce listened, swaying along to the music. When the other deputy joined his partner on stage, she turned to former police chief, elbow propped on the table, hand fiercely gripping his jaw as though to keep him from screaming. He looked at her with baleful blue eyes.

“They’re not that bad, right?” She observed, enjoying the flush of rage spreading across his face.

*Jim Croce is rolling over in his grave.*

“Could you say two Jims are rolling over in their graves? Sorry.” She dipped her head down to look at her drink, chewing her lip furiously to stifle a grin as Hop stared at her in horror.

*Are you making fun of my own death at my wake, Joyce Byers? I don't even have a body to roll.*

“Yeah, that was awful, I know.”

When she finally looked up Jim was studying her warmly. *It's good to see you smile again. Been a long time coming.*

The terrible irony was that having Hop's ghost haunting her throughout the funeral process had lessened the grief. There hadn't been a true moment of separation. Real or not, it was the only grounding thing amid this insanity. The longer she looked at him, the more she could believe he was still alive, sitting with her in this shitty bar like they had so many times before. That tonight was not just a hastily tacked on epilogue to their story.

“Joyce!” She felt a pair of hands latch onto her arm and nearly tug her off the bar stool. Karen Wheeler steadied herself on Joyce's shoulder. From a distance, in the dim light of the bar she looked as immaculate and put together as always, but up-close Joyce could see how her hair not as perfectly placed, how her make was slightly smeared by a fine sheen of sweat. “Joyce! Hey, how are you?” Her tone was gushing with warmth. “I've been thinking about you. Are you ok?”

“Fine, Karen, thanks.” Joyce didn't have to put much effort into the lie, focusing on helping Karen slide onto the seat next to her. “How are you?” She queried warily.

“Great, fine!” Karen shook a hand as though batting away the question. “Just shocked, you know it's such a tragedy. Jim and that young man who worked at the pool...what was his name? Billy? I'm just...a little torn up you know.” Joyce didn't know why but it felt like she was watching Karen attempt some kind of badly staged performance. Tiny flashes of emotions Joyce couldn't quite pin down (grief or maybe guilt?) flickered across Karen's face before disappearing under a look of concern. “But that's not what I'm here for. How are you doing?” Karen's hand covered Joyce's.

Joyce felt a flush of irritation and resisted the urge to yank her hand away. “I'm doing fine. Like you said it's a shock.”

Karen nodded wisely. "I think the kids have been taking Jim's death really hard. And on top of that, Mike's little girlfriend—the one I told you about from the other school? I think she's had a death in the family. They don't tell me anything, of course. But I think Mike's really broken up because he can't comfort her."

She ignored Hopper's noise of disgruntlement. "That's awful."

"Yeah." There was something charged about the silence, as Karen twisted a bottle of beer in her hands. "You know right? What happened that night?" Joyce looked up at the other woman in alarm, but Karen barreled on before Joyce could reply. "I mean...I saw you and Jim holding hands at the Fourth of July performance before... and you were in the parking lot at Starcourt."

"We...he...had to go the mall— because of the fire..." Joyce had done her best to memorize the newspaper story but now that she was under pressure the details were slipping away.

"But how did Billy and all those other people--? I just..." Karen twisted her head around to check for eavesdroppers. She lowered her voice. "It's not just me, right? There's some evil stuff happening in Hawkins? Ted says I'm imagining things and that we should trust our government but look what happened to Barb Holland. For our best interests, my ass. They tried to cover up her murder, who knows what else they could be hiding from us." Karen aggressively drained her beer.

*A regular Nancy Drew.*

Joyce had never felt the need to defend Karen, but she swiveled to glare at Hopper.

"But they haven't taken the people I love away from me, like they have with you. How you stand it? I wouldn't rest until I hunted down those bastards—"

"I'm learning about a new side of you, Karen." Joyce said weakly. "How many beers have you had tonight?"

"Five? Maybe going on six. Hold on a moment." Karen slide off the

bar stool and was already threading through people to the bar.

*Never pegged Karen for a beer person. More of a martini girl.*

“She is not doing ok, Hop.” Joyce watched in horror as Karen chatted with a husky looking biker. Karen leaned on the man’s arm and laughed loudly. “I’m worried, I’ve never seen her like this.”

*Yeah, looks like the little bit she knows is breaking her. But she won’t do anything. Karen’s always been a sheep.*

She lowered her voice as Karen made her way back to the table with a beer in each hand. “So was I before this all started. People change all the time.”

“Here you are!” Karen set a new beer next to Joyce’s half-finished one. She lifted her beer over her head and shouted. “To Jim!” Some nearby bar flies lifted their glasses echoing her riotously. Joyce was staring at Karen, like she was an entirely different person.

*Maybe the Mindflyer is back?*

Joyce seriously doubted it would be tolerating the stifling heat of the bar to blend in at a wake.

“Didn’t you and Jim date in high school?” Karen was shouting over a new karaoke ballad.

“For like a week? It was short lived.” Joyce spoke low, trying to gently coax Karen to not broadcast their conversation to the entire bar.

“But you guys found each other again. That’s so romantic.”

“More out of necessity. He helped find Will.”

Joyce felt a rush of relief as Florence from the police station joined them at the table, cutting off Karen’s next question. The relief was short lived. “There you are, Joyce. I just wanted to say I’m so sorry for your loss. I know Hopper thought the world of you. You know, I never saw that man whistle except when he came back from having lunch with you. You were the best thing that happened to him since

he came back to Hawkins.”

“Mmmm.” Joyce nodded, pressing her lips together anxiously. Of course, they would think Joyce was the reason for Hop’s improvement. They had no idea about El. She didn’t look at Hopper, but she was sure he looked just as mortified as she did.

Karen’s face crumbled, fat tears rolling down her cheeks. “Oh, Joyce. I knew you two were dating, I just didn’t want to overstep.”

“We weren’t...I wasn’t—” Joyce felt her face grow hot. She felt cornered. “We were just friends. Good friends.”

“Well, I know he cared about you so much. If you ever want to talk, you know where to find me.” Florence patted her hand and toddled back towards the door. Joyce watched her go, furious. She was suddenly aware of the surrounding people watching her. The moment she met their gaze they looked away, but she saw it—the looks of pity, scorn and curiosity she’d fought so hard to ignore the last three years. First Will, Bob and now Hopper. Typical Joyce Beyers, the freakshow extraordinaire, another loved one mysteriously disappeared. She had to leave.

“Well, we better be getting home.” Joyce snagged the bottle out of Karen’s hand before the housewife could bring it to her lips. Joyce slipped off her stool and snaked an arm around Karen’s tiny waist to support her. “Your husband will be worried.”

Karen blew air through her lips, twisting around to grab her beer back. “Oh, please he doesn’t give a shit!”

“Well, your kids will be worried. We better check on them.”

“True. He doesn’t know how to look after himself let alone the kids.” Karen said bitterly. “He can’t even work the coffee maker properly.”

Joyce carefully maneuvered Karen out of the bar, avoiding eye contact of the other bar patrons. As they slipped onto the street, Karen flaunted her bottle. “I can even drink on the street! Who’s gonna stop me? The cops?” She shouted. Karen made her way to Joyce’s Pinto. “They’re all in the bar and Jim’s not even here!”

Hopper was on the opposite side of the Pinto, resting his arms on the roof as he gleefully watched Karen struggle with the door. *I wouldn't stop this if I was here. This is the best thing that's ever happened.*

Joyce inevitably helped Karen wrestle the door open and eased her inside. Finally, she was able to pull onto the main drag of Hawkins and take a turn towards Karen's neighborhood.

"You know you can always talk to me, right?" Karen leaned in, the scent of alcohol mixing with her floral perfume. Her eyes were wide and earnest. "I know people think they can't confide in me, but I can keep a secret, I can help." Karen's voice cracked a little.

One thing Joyce had learned was that while it was easy to be a little bit resentful of Karen (Miss Perfect Housewife and mother), it was hard to hate her. This moment of vulnerability made her deeply sad. There was a large part of Mike and Nancy's lives Karen was not privy to and with luck would never be.

"I know you can. But maybe there are somethings that we're better off not knowing."

"You really think so?"

"I mean, if it hurts us more to know. Sometimes ignorance is bliss."

Karen scoffed and took a swig of her beer. "Ignorance is just ignorance. We're going to get hurt whether we know or not, right? Because life is bullshit. And between knowing and not knowing... wouldn't you rather know?"

Joyce didn't have a response but she suddenly understood where Nancy's bursts of unexpected intensity came from.

*We should have been drinking with Karen this entire time. She's a damn philosopher.*

"Did he tell you?"

"Tell me what?"

"Did Jim tell you how he felt about you?"

Again, she had no answer for that. “Wait. What are we talking about?” The realization they were not talking about what she thought they were talking about had completely thrown her.

“The whole knowing vs. not knowing. You’re not sure how Jim felt about you?”

Joyce opened her mouth and immediately shut it.

“Oh. You’re not sure how **you** felt about **him**?”

Joyce sent a furious look in the rearview mirror. “This is why we don’t drink with Karen’, she thought viciously.

“Joyce, it’s ok.”

“Karen. I don’t know what the hell you’re talking about, but things are definitely not **ok**.” The pristine Wheeler house was on the left. Joyce turned roughly into the driveway and put the vehicle in park. She moved to throw open her door but Karen grabbed her arm to stop her.

“You’re mad. I’m sorry, I just...” Tears were building up in Karen’s eyes. “You’re holding it together so well and I know you must be in a lot of pain.”

“I’m fine. I’m—” Joyce ran a hand through her hair, the other one gripping the steering wheel. “Look, you have to believe me. Jim and I were good friends. Nothing more. I cared about him and I miss him, but there was never anything there.”

In the back seat, Hopper was silent. When she looked in the rearview mirror, his eyes were focused on his passenger window.

“I’m sorry.” Karen sniffled, leaning back her head on the seat, staring at the ceiling. “I’m probably just projecting. My marriage isn’t...well, it isn’t going the best.”

“Join the club.” Joyce was exhausted. “Karen, I’d love to talk with you about this later but I have to get home to the kids.”

“Oh, sure.” Joyce ignored the stab of guilt at the disappointment in

Karen's voice. "I'll see you later then." Karen walked unsteadily to the house, but thankfully managed to dig out her keys and disappear through the garage door.

Joyce heaved a sigh of relief as the door closed behind her. "You were right, the wake was a bad idea."

Hopper didn't respond.

## 9. Chapter 9

“You’ve been awfully quiet.” Joyce commented. Hopper was staring out into the darkness of the front lawn from the porch swing. He didn’t look at her. He hadn’t spoken a word since they got back from the wake hours ago and it was going on nine o’clock. “Wouldn’t have predicted Princess Karen would have a meltdown at your wake, huh?” She chuckled and took a drag from her cigarette. Still nothing. She eyed him. “Hop? Come on, you’re freaking me out.”

*Just thinking.* He looked at her, finally, but his expression was tense. *You know you said we were best friends, but you didn’t cry. Not even a single tear.*

“Oh, I’m sorry, is my grieving not enough for you?” Joyce, stared at him perplexed. “What did you want me to do? Wail and beat my fists on your casket?”

*I’m just saying that maybe it came off a little insincere. If we were such good friends, why wouldn’t you cry a little at my funeral— just saying.* Hopper stood up and began pacing back and forth on the porch now.

“Hop, I made a speech.”

*The speech about how I’m an asshole? Thanks for that by the way.*

She gaped at him. “You **were** an asshole in high school, you’ve said so yourself. If this is about the joke at the wake...”

*It’s not about the joke. I just,* He moved his hands like he was trying to summon words out of the air. *You say you cared about me, but you haven’t acted like it. Not once.*

“Jim. I’m hallucinating that you’re here. I don’t know what more you want from me.”

*What if I’m not a hallucination?*

Joyce’s mind was reeling. “I don’t even know what we’re fighting about right now.”

*If I'm not a hallucination, if I'm actually a ghost then I'm just...stuck. Stuck in this unrequited...friendship.* The way he pronounced 'friendship', like it was filthy word, brought everything into focus.

She laughed, a forced, hollow sound that echoed in her chest. "This is about what I said to Flo and Karen? You're pissed I said we were just friends?"

Hopper shook his head violently at the porch, hands poised defensively on his hips. *That's not it—*

"Yes, it is." Joyce stood up stepping up so that she was directly in front of him. "You're pissed off because I told the truth?"

*Yeah. The truth. Keep telling yourself that, Joyce.* He snorted.

"That's what we are, Hop. We were friends. Why is it so hard for you accept that?"

*This level of denial is really unbelievable. It's impressive, honestly.*

"You want to know what's unbelievable, Hop? This bullshit you're trying to pull right now? It's the same shit I went through with Lonnie."

That sparked a heat in his eyes. He gritted out, *I am nothing like that sack of shit ex of yours.*

"Oh, yeah? This controlling, possessive horseshit is textbook Lonnie. And news flash, asshole! I don't belong to you!"

*I never said you did! I'm not angry because I can't control you, Joyce, it's because you're so purposefully obtuse.* He barreled on when she opened her mouth in protest. *It's like you're scared to admit there was something between us.*

"I am not scared."

*What is it Joyce? Are you ashamed of me? Did I embarrass you somehow?*

"Of course not."

*I can't fucking tell, but why don't you tell me? How do you feel about us?* He was looking at her, face heavy with resignation. *Because I don't think we were just friends.*

"Well, first off, not everything is about you." She snapped. She opened her mouth to let out the words that she knew would tear him down, end this conversation for good. But something about the way he looked at her, as though seeing her fully. It was the same expression he had in the months after Bob's funeral. When he knew words were not enough and he just let her talk. He deserved the truth after everything they'd been through. She closed her eyes and pinched the bridge of her nose, feeling her chest sting as it expanded. The words tumbled out, softly and painfully. "After...after losing Bob, it was so hard. I mean, you know. You were there through all of it." She looked at him and held out her hands in surrender. "I've never had this before, Hop. There's been Lonnie and Bob and some others but you're the only one to stick around through everything. I guess I didn't want to risk it."

*Risk what, exactly?*

"I don't know. Our friendship or whatever it was."

*I wasn't going anywhere, Joyce. You were the one running away.* This was delivered in his cop voice. The one he used when he thought someone was being unreasonable or illogical.

Joyce ground her cigarette out. "Fine. Yes, I was running away because after Bob there was no fucking way I was going to go through that again. But just because I was thinking of leaving doesn't mean I didn't care about you."

Hopper sat back down on the swing, looked at his hands.

Joyce felt her irritation subside. She added gently, "And if I'm hallucinating you then that means I must miss you, right?"

*Still stuck on the hallucination. You'd rather believe you're losing your mind than accept that I'm a ghost? I think you don't want to accept that I'm dead.*

“Not that it matters anyway.” Joyce knew that the finality of it was too much. Ludicrous as it was after their field trip to the Lab and the funeral. She still didn’t want to accept it.

*I guess not.* Hopper murmured. They fell silent, staring out into the night. Until Hopper let out a snort of laughter. *You know what’s funny? I’ve been thinking about how hauntings are kind of a two-man operation. The ghost has a purpose and the person being haunted has to, I guess, in some way to accept the haunting?* Joyce gave him a confused look and he waved his hand. *I don’t know I haven’t thought this out completely. But you asked me why I was haunting for you. And I honestly don’t know. I don’t have a reason, but I think maybe you do.*

“You’re talking in circles, ghost or hallucination you’re just my mind making shit up.”

*But whatever you call it, you can’t deny that you’ve tied me here. And I thought maybe it was your guilt about what happened but maybe not. What if it’s not guilt?* He looked at her with that tender look that nearly ripped her asunder. *What if it’s love?*

Joyce didn’t move, her mouth had gone dry.

Hopper stood and drew closer until he was standing directly in front of her. She had to crane her neck to look up at him. *I think you loved me, Joyce Byers. But it’s too painful to admit.*

She opened her mouth to say something, but nothing came out. There was nothing to dispute as he said the words, they rang as the only true thing she’d heard in the past week. Instead she dipped her chin, unable to look away. “Maybe. I mean...” Hopper face broke into a grin, his hands coming up to cradle both sides of her face as he leaned to kiss her. Instinctively she closed her eyes. wondered if the sensation was real or her body just desperately constructing it, she wanted it so bad. He drew back, his thumbs gently caressing her cheeks.

Joyce searched his face, unable to keep the grin from her face. “Is that how you get all your perps to confess during interrogations?”

*It’s more effective than you would think.*

She laughed but the happiness she felt was tainted with bittersweet pain. None of this was real. "Hop, what am I supposed to do with this?"

*You need closure, Joyce. If you hold onto this, it will tear you apart. Trust me, I know.*

"But I'm not ready to let you go." Joyce confessed, tears welling up again.

*Eventually you will. Find a good man. Some...I don't know, CPA with a nice retirement package.*

"I hate him already." Joyce said seriously making him smile.

*You have a lot of life ahead, a lot of love and happiness. You're going to be fine.*

"Without you." She bit her lip and reached out a hand to lay on his chest.

Hopper nodded. Joyce stepped forward, pulling him close. She felt him press a kiss into her hair. *Try to be happy and take care of my girl, ok?*

"I will." She murmured into his chest. She breathed in and then out, "Love you."

His voice was low. *Love you too. See you around, Beyers.*

When she opened her eyes, he was gone. She whirled around and opened her mouth to call out but his name died in her mouth. She stood, listening to the pounding drone of the cicadas in the dark and the felt his presence dissipate, the reality of his absence sinking into her bones. Choking back a sob she sank onto the porch swing and, finally, let herself cry. She wasn't sure how much time passed, but eventually she raised her head and exhaled, scrubbing at her face. From the living room she could hear the chatter of the television. The kids would be waiting. She stood and squared her shoulders. Tomorrow she'd call the realtor, let him the know she was preparing the house. It was time to move forward.